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Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As the cost of the war in Iraq climbs past \$300 billion, and there are estimates that suggest the total financial cost will far exceed \$1 trillion, there is another cost that is less measurable but no less significant: that is the stress on the military itself and the consequences for our fighting men and women, for innocent Iraqis, and the capacity of our Armed Forces far into the future.

The Pentagon has announced that the Army has met its recruiting goals for the 13th consecutive month, but we are seeing an erosion in the quality of recruits in our Armed Forces as more and more young Americans who disagree with what we are doing in Iraq have chosen to stay away. In order to meet recruiting targets, the Army has relaxed restrictions against high school dropouts and have started letting in more applicants who score in the lowest third on the Armed Forces aptitude test, a group known as category 4 recruits. Since the mid 1980s, category 4 recruits were kept, as a matter of policy, to less than 2 percent of all recruits. But by the end of 2005, the percentage of recruits who fell under this lowest category has reached double digits.

In my district, not only has the Army lowered its standards but recruiters have been pushed to violate the remaining standards in order to meet these recruiting targets. We have had two examples of where autistic young men have been recruited into the Army despite the regulations. As I have discussed on the floor of the House how outrageous this was, indeed, one of these young men did not even know that there was a war going on in Iraq. This all has terrible consequences for our efforts against the global war on terror.

This weekend's papers were full of articles and editorials about the role that our lowered recruiting standards may have played in the recent spate of reports of service members being accused of atrocities in Iraq. What does this tell us about our efforts to eliminate the insurgency and win the hearts and minds of people in the Middle East?

We must also consider the long-term cost to our national security and to the military itself. These lower standards are impacting the Army's capacities and will continue to do so for at least a generation into the future.

There was a RAND Corporation study last fall that showed replacing a gunner who had scored 3A on the aptitude test with one who scored that category 4 that I mentioned a moment ago, reduced the chances of hitting targets by 34 percent. In another study, 84 three-man teams from the Army's active duty signal battalions were given the task of making a communications system operational, what you need to do in a theater of battle. Teams consisting of the category 3A had a 67 percent chance of succeeding. Those with category 4 personnel had only a 29 percent chance. More than two-thirds to barely more than a quarter.

There is also damage to the reputation of the good name of the United States military. We are intensely proud of the young men and women who have served under such difficult circumstances. It is not fair for their hard work and heroic efforts to be tainted by the action of others or for their job to be made more difficult or more dangerous due to substandard soldiers who are finding their way into the Armed Forces. When we lower recruitment standards or recruit those who have no business in the military at all, the consequences will be felt by our military in Iraq today and by the entire Nation for years to come.

One of the reasons it is imperative to have a sensible plan to scale down and transition our activities in Iraq, handing them over to the Iraqis, themselves, is to stop this erosion of our military capacity that has occurred because of the sadly inept management of the occupation by this administration and the Secretary of Defense. There was never a doubt about our winning the war in Iraq. They just weren't prepared to win the peace.

Our young men and women in the armed services deserve for us to get it right, because their lives are at stake. And we owe it to every American, because there are dangerous people around the world and the integrity of the military is critical to our fight to protect America.